



Op-Ed: Drones Are Making A Difference In Yemen

March 13, 2013 | Dr. W. Andrew Terrill

Tagged in: Op-Ed

Unmanned aerial vehicles (often known as drones) have recently been the subject of intense controversy due to their use in remote parts of the world to target individuals designated as terrorists. This concern is appropriate, because many aspects of their use are clearly in need of scrupulous legal and ethical consideration. Underlying all of the factors must also be a consideration of the issue of military effectiveness. Regulating the use of a marginally useful weapons system is often easy; regulating a highly effective system in a way that forecloses options can be difficult since more is at stake.

At least in the case of Yemen, drones appear to have been stunningly successful in achieving goals that support the U.S. and Yemeni national interests by helping to defeat the radical group al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). This group is one of the most successful affiliates of the original al-Qaeda group led by Osama bin Laden until his death in 2011. In his struggle against AQAP, Yemeni reform President Abed Rabbu Hadi has spoken publicly of U.S. drones in glowing terms as a way of striking this enemy, while minimizing collateral damage. Several key examples support Hadi's view of drones as a war-winning system.

The 2011 death of AQAP planner Anwar al-Awlaki in an apparent drone strike is especially informative. Despite Awlaki's U.S. citizenship, President Obama was reported by *Newsweek* to have considered him a higher priority for capture or elimination than Ayman al-Zawahiri, bin Laden's replacement as the leader of "al-Qaeda central." Federal prosecutors, in a case involving an alleged Awlaki associate, maintain that he was the mastermind behind a variety of terrorist

activities including the 2009 “Christmas bomber” plot. In this instance, a terrorist operative and Awlaki “student” sought to blow up a passenger aircraft traveling from Amsterdam to Detroit with 280 passengers aboard.

The unsuccessful bombing scheme appears to have had the diabolical purpose of attempting to provoke the U.S. leadership to invade Yemen in response to these innocent deaths. Such an intervention with ground troops could have produced catastrophic results. Yemen is a highly nationalistic country with around 24 million people and 60 million firearms. Any intervention there could last for years and swell rather than diminish the ranks of AQAP. This disaster was worth avoiding.

Drones may also have saved the United States from a serious foreign policy crisis a second time in Yemen. In May 2012, President Hadi unleashed a strong military offensive against AQAP forces which had seized large portions of several provinces in the south and were administering them in what one AQAP leader described as “the Taliban way.” Hadi had only recently taken office after a long and painful set of international and domestic negotiations to end the 33-year rule of President Ali Abdullah Saleh. If the Yemeni military had been defeated in the confrontation with AQAP, this outcome could well have led to the collapse of the Yemeni reform government and the emergence of anarchy there. Hadi needed every tool he could obtain to help him win.

Drones were widely reported in the U.S. and international press as helping to enable the government victory in southern Yemen, both by providing intelligence to combatant forces and by eliminating key leaders and small groups of individuals. Approximately 4 months after the Yemeni government’s June victory in the south, Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta stated that the role of drones in Yemen was “vital,” in one of the first authoritative statements on the combat role of these systems.

In considering these examples, it seems clear that drones are helping to prevent the emergence of an AQAP state in southern Yemen and prevent a major terrorist strike, either of which could create pressure for a risky and expensive U.S. military intervention in Yemen. At some point, a reformed Yemeni military should be effective enough to maintain domestic security without relying on these assets which remain unpopular among large segments of the Yemeni public. Until then, drone use seems like an option that should be kept open to avoid the need for much more frightening choices later.

The views expressed in this op-ed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Department of the Army, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government. This piece is cleared for public release; distribution is unlimited.

Organizations interested in reprinting this or other SSI and USAWC Press opinion pieces should contact the Editor for Production via e-mail at *SSI_Publishing@conus.army.mil*. All organizations granted this right must include the following statement: “Reprinted with permission of the Strategic Studies Institute and U.S. Army War College Press, U.S. Army War College.”